

INTRODUCTION TO “PSYCHEDELICA AND ELECTRONICA”

— GUEST EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION —

TRACE REDDELL

UNIVERSITY OF DENVER (US)

GRAHAM ST JOHN

UNIVERSITY OF HUDDERSFIELD (UK)

This is Trace here reminding you that psychedelic music has evolved, mutated, hybridized and flourished over the past sixty years. Lightning recap, heard in your favorite rock-doc voice-over, friends. Psychedelia inevitably evokes a unique form of folk, pop and rock that crystallized a wide range of social, technological and cultural trends in the second half of the 1960s. By 1970, rock bands like Hawkwind and Gong launched their spaced-out silver machines and pixie tea pots into the festival scene. Over the course of the decade, countless bands all over the world unleashed their regionalized takes on psychedelic sounds. In the early 1980s, a neo-psychedelic revival and new garage rock scene sprouts up in the wake of punk. Meanwhile, German electronica, Jamaican dub, Indian raga, disco and dance music are just some of the forms that feed a simultaneously cosmic and psychedelic, ancient and futuristic sensibility into the swelling currents of hip-hop, techno, house and trance. This increasingly international tangle of psychedelic musical influences feed into the various acid house, ambient house, psybient, Goa/psytrance, trip-hop, glitch-hop, neuro and other scenes of particular interest here.

Of course, new instruments, electronic effects processes and production practices forever changed the soundscape of popular music in the second half of the 1960s. Across the trail of genres and scenes mentioned above, a good part of the psychedelic dimension appears to involve technological innovation and experimentation. Most of these music scenes have also been associated with psychoactive chemicals of some kind or another, particularly the tryptamines, and the formation of new drug music subcultures. Psychedelic substances can certainly foster new ways of making sounds, and they can be participatory agents engaged in expressivity and sound-making. These sonic, technological and psychopharmacological affordances are often conflated in practice, at times in endlessly compelling and generative ways. But with “psychedelia” overcoded as an historical trope of Sixties pop culture, here we have adopted “psychedelica” to convey a more agile, adaptable and living sonic ecology.

Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture 15(1): 4–12

ISSN 1947-5403 ©2023 Dancecult <http://dj.dancecult.net>

<http://dx.doi.org/10.12801/1947-5403.2023.15.01.01>

dancecult
JOURNAL OF ELECTRONIC DANCE MUSIC CULTURE

Shifting from the people and things that make sounds to the activity of listening also provides a useful calibration ahead of the content that follows. Certainly, the capacity for psychedelics to enhance our experience of the music that we listen to is remarkable, even while music acts as a powerful resource that profoundly shapes setting and guides mindset during psychedelic experience. MRI scans suggest that the brain regions most engaged in listening to music are also stimulated by LSD and psilocybin. Researchers at the Johns Hopkins Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences have therefore concluded that psychedelics and music are mechanistically related in the brain (Strickland, Garcia-Romeu and Johnson 2021: 473). Writing research papers for science journals increasingly entails making Spotify playlists to support a psilocybin study. Mapping the brain of a listening subject administered psilocybin while listening to an intentionally crafted playlist lets researchers model the neurological and cognitive activities that turn out to be involved with how we experience emotional resonance, attribute meaningfulness, construct and manage our identities and maintain an historical narrative for ourselves. The music is sequenced to help stimulate the somewhat reliable arc of the psychedelic experience. Psychedelic therapists often do this as well, a practice validated by research. A review presented by Frederick Barrett of Johns Hopkins, Katrin Preller of University Hospital for Psychiatry Zurich, and post-doctorate researcher Mendel Kaelen of the Imperial College London succinctly concludes that music significantly effects therapy by “modulating emotion, including the facilitating of mystical experiences, and through supporting autobiographical processes” (Barrett et al, 2018: 356). It seems that contemporary psychedelic research initiatives and therapies are equally inconceivable without the integration of music. Listening on psychedelics is one of the most important tools to measure cognitive activity, monitor neurological health and foster personal growth.

Given the contemporary resurgence of clinical psychedelic research, psychedelic therapies and decriminalized personal use of some psychedelic substances—and granting the prominent role that music is understood to play in all of these contexts—it is past time for a reassessment of the special relationship between psychedelics and electronica. This special issue of *Dancecult* addresses a few of the interactions between psychedelics and electronic dance music cultures since the late 1960s. It takes the form of three feature articles, five From the Floors and a Conversation piece. The edition includes other non-themed Feature and Reviews content (see below). You are in for quite a journey.

The variety of spatiotemporal landscapes alone is notable. The Magical Kingdom of Endor, a small hippie ballroom in Boulder, CO, 1968. The Black Ark Studio, Kingston, Jamaica, mid-1970s. A chill-out room in the late 1980s, in Heaven. Mutonia, a cyberpunk zone near Santarcangelo di Romagna, Italy, 1990. The Epicentre pleasure factory, Byron Bay, Australia, 1990s. The dance floors of western Canadian transformational festivals, Astral Harvest 2014, and Shambhala, 2015. The mycelial pathways of a modular mushroom synthesist’s YouTube channel, WWW, 2023. As for the music discussed, little is identified as psychedelic per se, and few of the musicians, producers and even our writers invest much

in the terminology. The acid house and psytrance discussed by Graham St John and Paul Chambers, and the psychedelic rock bands mentioned in Scott Taylor's FTF, are in fact the outliers here. Two of the three feature articles focus on psychedelic-adjacent forms that include Jamaican dub, dub techno, ambient house, trip-hop, glitch-hop and electric mushroom music. The variety of writerly persona on display is also noticeable. Each feature and FTF article presents a notably unique voice, and one of the features even celebrates a particularly unique voice!

My own "Other Kinds of Mind There: Echologies of Psychedelic Sonic Substance" feeds the tools of dub production—reverb, delay and echo—into a rhetorical apparatus reflecting on three sample-based forms of psychedelic electronica: ambient house, trip-hop and glitch-hop. I propose an *echology* of "sonic substance", the latter a term that I have adopted from anthropologist Bernd Brabec de Mori to propose that psychedelic chemicals and sonic materials work together to make the trip-defining capacities of set and setting deeply entangled and virtually indistinguishable. This article considers psychedelic forms in the wake of dub sampling that converge with some different electronic music cultures, with an emphasis on the mind-manifesting properties of recorded sound. Turning soundscape ecologist R. Murray Schafer's prohibition against recorded sound on its head, I argue that sample-based psychedelic forms valorize rather than pathologize "schizophonic" conditions. Here, I try to rhetorically sample my way into the sonic psychotomimetic state of "hearing voices in my head" afforded by the non-human agencies of silent (non-sound wave originating) sounds recalled from memory, intentional or otherwise. I consider how these afford us and meditate briefly on our ultimate loss of them.

Maria Perevedentseva's "Timbre and the 'Zone of Entanglement' in Electronic Dance Music: Re-Thinking Musico-Social Ontologies with the Mycelial Turn" is an original and very generous survey of the critical network of recent scholarship that has formed around mushrooms. It's more nuanced than that suggests, of course, but the fact is that we've all been lacking a general overview of what Perevedentseva calls "the mycelial turn", and this nutrient-rich compost will keep this reader returning for ages. A theme of "renaissance" informs the work as mycology, neuropsychopharmacology and timbre studies bring a sense of renewal to the investigation of the unique tonal tendencies of EDM, dub techno in particular, and so manifest novel modes of minded-ness and social collectivity through extended affective affiliations. Electrically and vibrationally, bass entrains deep ecologies that summon listeners to engage new forms of collective ontology, collaborative embodiment and social meaning-making. Tuning into some of the synthetic timbral forms threaded throughout EDM history, Perevedentseva explains that the "circular symbolic economy of meanings specific to particular subgenre communities" reflect and refract psychedelic interventions in individual consciousness as well as social connection, valorizing the unstable wobble as a sonic sign of resistance against reductive experiences of "we are all one now". The mycelial turn, in this respect, specifically offers potent alternatives to oceanic models of psychedelic experience in the EDM sonic ecosystem.

Graham St John's "The Voice of the Apocalypse: Terence McKenna as Raving Medium" tracks the schizophrenic McKenna as his voice emerges to become one of the iconic tropes of acid house and psytrance, a sonic meme, a *tryptameme*, in fact. St John tracks McKenna's transformation into the medium of the ineffable, the voice of that which can't be voiced. That this un-voice should become what St John calls the "most sampled individual in the history of electronic music" is delightful, schizophrenia at its most stark raving. McKenna loops the ouroboros loop—"As his very own archive, 'McKenna' became a standard device for musicians seeking to craft a transformative audioscape", right?—and his transcendent unspeakable elf chatter channels something beyond language and history. Can language trip? Our Magic 8-ball says, "Signs point to yes." You see, the insertion of McKenna's voice throughout St John's "The Voice of the Apocalypse" plays out for us on the page in a way that delivers the very effect that it serves in the acid house and psytrance tracks that he's writing about. This offers up several brilliant "spinning mirrorball" moments, as McKenna's voice—sampled and remixed throughout St John's text—exerts the "remystic" sway of the "transcendental object" at the end of time from which all history flows backward, reflected in moments of its recursive emergence through the acid house rave scene that it in part triggered! Such circular logics are prevalent throughout the history of psychedelic music, leading to my adoption of "The Magic Circle" (a rejected title for the Beatles' 1966 album, *Revolver*) to characterize the perennial nature of psychedelic experience. Here, Graham, has unintentionally refracted one of my most transcendental and apocalyptic mirrorball hallucinations, which happened when I saw Pink Floyd at Mile High Stadium, Denver, Colorado, in spring 1988, dosed on six tabs of LSD and working telepathically with other members of the audience to smoothe out the fragmented pieces—rapidly dodging in uneven lines, left and right, up and down—of a vast mirrorball suspended in the air above the stadium as a way to assuage the crisis of ego-death that the acid and the concert's heavy musical themes had triggered.

What is particularly noteworthy about the three themed features is the way in which each rhetorically acts out its central premise. My own piece integrates samples and echoes beyond the typical function of any kind of scholarly citation; instead, these take on the role of glitchy, intrusive thoughts, here played out not as fraught lapses of conscience or impulsive urges to do dangerous things but rather as supportive cognitive affordances, blessings from the internal sound bank, sonic sustenance. I have opted for sharing a personal set of musical affordances that in fact model what I seek to better understand. The highly individualized sonic practices of Boards of Canada and Flying Lotus give guidance to the sound ghosts that mull about in all our brains, so that we might know better how to draw on their resources in times of need and personal re-creation, and so that we will be prepared for the parting from them that is our inevitable fate. Perevedentseva's piece is also, I have suggested, rich with nutrients. Beyond the perceived and readable, an even richer, LFO electric resource bolts through the many threads of the team of experimental researchers, theorists, scholars, and musicians assembled here, linking seemingly disparate

lines of research and scholarship with a deep, subharmonic rumble that works on the gut as much as the brain. And the injection of McKenna's voice into St John's "The Voice of the Apocalypse" delivers the very tryptameme effect that the piece is about. McKenna's voice both guides and disrupts, taking over the text, opening up wormholes to other worlds of written text and recorded tracks alike, pushing this historical analysis, these written words, into a multifaceted transformational technology. The point is, as much as the three articles are about something, each of them also do something to the receptive reader. They may be regarded as psychedelic affordances in their own right.

Are you getting a sense of how these mycelial affective affiliations work in this special issue of *Dancecult* on "psychedelica and electronica"? Wait until you get a load of what's going down on the floors.

Graham here, rounding out our introduction. Just as Trace has given shape to the *music*, I'll here supply shape to the *dance* component inherent to "psychedelica and electronica". Electronic dance movements are event cultures that are not infrequently contexts for personal hierophanies and shared encounters with the transcendent involving consciousness alteration achieved through combinations of rhythm, dance and the use of a pharmacopeia of psychoactive plants and compounds (not uncommonly regarded as "psychedelic" or "entheogenic"). While such experiences are diverse and will not always involve these latter ingredients, a spectrum of chemical accoutrements—LSD, psilocybin (from mushrooms), DMT and a host of novel research chemicals, alongside MDMA, ketamine and cannabis¹—are present in the cultural bloodstream of dance musics, events and their communities. The trend in my three-and-a-half decades of research on, and personal experience with, diverse event cultures, is to bear witness to these occasions playing out among the more meaningful, significant and compelling experiences in the lives of interlocutors. Across electronic music and dance scenes, *the vibe* amounts to emic parlance connoting a quality of experience tantamount to a sacred, and even religious, experience. A recognition of the "special sauce" of raving, doofing, burning, etc., compels researchers to transit beyond the clinical-juridical paradigm that has conventionally targeted the prevalence of psychoactive substances (including psychedelics) as evidence of a pathological-criminal crisis. As my own experience attests, the implications of such episodes are significant, and formative, for individuals (including musicians) and the dance music communities that emerge in the wake of epic "trips." These episodes hold the potential to incite or revive genres, aesthetics and events, with the latter not uncommonly perceived as spiritually significant spaces, like churches or temples—the staging grounds of transformational experiences. Emerging internationally in the last three decades, "transformational festivals" and other *transfestive* events possessing the design of the rite of passage have embraced the ecstatic and transcendent *techne* of the electrosonic dance assemblage that possesses digital, chemical and sensory elements to effect transformative outcomes. Psychedelic substances have become pivotal to the *superliminality* orchestrated and optimised within these spaces.

While these developments have continued apace, and have been afforded some treatment (e.g. St John 2013; Newson et al. 2021), research remains limited in this field. There is much scope to address the psychedelic liminality of transfestive eventscapes, their multisensorial aesthetics and their diverse habitués. Personal and autoethnographic in style (not scholarly), contributions to this issue of *Dancecult* assist readers in exploring this terrain. Our From the Floor content is comprised of a broad contingent of contributions, most of which were solicited and all of which are as visually impressive as they are textually rewarding. The first offering comes from humble psychedelic lightshowman, C. Scott Taylor. In "From Spontinuity to Dream Seeds: My Journey with Light Shows from the Sixties to the Present", Taylor recounts (for the first time) the intriguing story of Spontinuity, the 1960s and 1970s "family" of light warriors, and his later Dream Seeds project. Literally working in the dark for much of his career, Taylor illuminates the lightshow artform that was formative to psychedelic shows. I should point out that Taylor did not come to me with the idea to tell this story. It was only through my persuasion that he took up the task, and I thank him for leaning into the narrative. His entry will be of great interest not only to sixties aficionados but to VJs and other visual artists working with digital and other media who will count Taylor among their light-jockey forebears. From Grateful Dead and Jefferson Airplane shows lit by Taylor and friends in Boulder in the 1960s, we transit to Mutoid Waste Co sculptures created in London, Berlin and Italy in the 1980s. Giorgia Gaiá's "Kaos, Kilowatt and Ketamine: A Cultural History of the Free Tekno Movement" is replete with imagery of the Mutoid's recycledelic interventions that formed the visual backdrop for Spiral Tribe and other proto tekno outfits signature to the 1990s teknival movement emergence. Gaia has created a platform for her ongoing research at the intersection of "kaos, kilowatts and ketamine." From there, we embark on a trio of personal odysseys addressing events in North America from the 1990s through to the present. In "Detroit Ecstasy: Ruminations on Raving, 'Movement' and Place", Rebekah Farrugia gives account of her experience in Detroit's techno scene of the '90s, while also addressing the emergence of that city's Movement festival. When Farrugia references Detroit's legendary No Way Back parties at the bottom end of her article, she effectively creates an opening for creator of Substack newsletter *Rave New World*, Michelle Lhooq, who takes the baton with her report on the event known among its fanbase as Techno Thanksgiving. In "No Way Back," Lhooq interviews several key DJs in the No Way Back crew to give account of what has long been one of the more serious, and seriously under-reported, underground events. Enlivened by her own adventures at No Way Back, and addressing its sound and visual design, the author traces the unique strain of Detroit psychedelia coursing through the veins of NWB. Bringing home our From the Floor contingent, in an autoethnographic reprise from her highly commendable MA thesis, "Dancing through Transformational Music Festivals in Western Canada: Tales from the Forest Floor", Kelci Mohr gives a masterclass in courageous writing and creative research practice.

The issue's Conversation piece by Paul Chambers, "Beyond the Brain: Happening at East Edge", represents something of a scoop for *Dancecult*. In Australia's northeast New South Wales in the mid-1990s, Byron Bay's Beyond the Brain parties became, as Chambers indicates, "synonymous with a good time". This matter of factoid has never been properly recognised in cultural histories of that region, or in the history of "doof" (i.e. the Australian rave underground). But now, with this evocative historical document, there is no excuse to ignore their significance. Integral to his article's import, Chambers kicks up some dust with the launch of *Beyond the Brain with Terence McKenna*, a film produced by Chambers (in conjunction with Jenny Lusk) about the Beyond the Brain (BtB) event in February 1997 that was headlined by Terence McKenna. This new documentary film, which frames BtB around McKenna's three-part spoken word performance, and which has waited over a quarter-of-a-century to be exposed to the light, is launched in conjunction with this issue of *Dancecult*. Combined, Chambers' article and video open a window on a long-forgotten *feralien* moment, a fertile underground scene that had its efflorescence in the Beyond the Brain events. Given his co-cat herding role in producing these events among a large network of contributors (many of whom are name-checked in his article), Chambers is well positioned to undertake this documentation.

While the features in this issue may be as orthogonal to one another as can be imagined under the title "Psychedelica and Electronica", each component of this strange trinity holds significance and value. Focused on a figure inspiring milieus of musicians and dance floor occupants over three decades, my own entry on Terence McKenna stretches our understanding of "psychedelic music". What might be considered so surprising about this attention to McKenna is that while he had undertaken his own independent study of the history or art, music did not itself feature among his chief interests, and nor did it feature in his considerable repertoire. McKenna was no great fan of any music. And nor might it be added was he known for his dance moves. He, quite famously, did not listen to music during his psychedelic experiences—his so-called "heroic doses" (i.e. five grams of dried *Psilocybe cubensis* in silent darkness). In one of his earliest recorded public appearances, at Berkeley's Shared Visions bookstore in July 1983, McKenna explained that in his preference for sensory deprivation he was not decrying music, conceding that music is "an *Ursprache* . . . a language of emotion" (McKenna 1983). But while McKenna had an intellectual approach to what he called the "pythagorean inner music" (Anon 1993) that may issue from one's soul during the psychedelic experience, whether through lack of inclination or absence of training there was no effort to translate that inner sound into music. McKenna was no musician, although he did develop in his final years an interest in drone music. Drone is "my idea of what experimental music is supposed to sound like," he once informed John Balance and Peter Christopherson from European experimental band Coil (Balance and Christopherson 1996). Returning to that early rap at Shared Visions, it was there that McKenna divulged how one of his most memorable trips had been afforded by a single drone-like sound, described like "the seed around which the multiplicity of the hallucinogenic vision can gather itself and constellate". And then the Beethoven of words

tinkled notes high and weird. “I blush to tell you this, but some of my most interesting trips have been to the accompaniment of my floor heater which makes a buzz like a refrigerator. And that buzz becomes the cutting edge of a light which is like a comet giving off in the eddies of its trail ... hallucination—all the hallucinations there are” (McKenna 1983). There’s much that one can read from this admission, not least that taking a psychedelic compound can afford one’s capacity to hear, or perhaps more accurately in the case of McKenna, to *see*, the music, where previously none was experienced. This is not a subject addressed in my study of McKenna’s virtual psychopomp legacy in this issue, but McKenna’s blushing honest appraisal of his set merging with setting—which alludes to the significance of what Trace identifies as the “non-human agencies at work in the sonic substance”—invokes the implications of humans being *taken by* psychedelics (in this case, *Psilocybe cubensis*).

Given the growing receptivity of psychedelics within academia across schools and disciplines—trends concomitant with decriminalisation—it is a natural expectation that psychedelics will enjoy a renaissance mirrored in studies of electronic music and dance culture. For ethnomusicologists, psychologists, historians, anthropologists, philosophers and students of popular music, among others, there remains much to address in terms of psychological and cultural implications, methodological innovations, and legal dilemmas, not to mention aesthetics, phenomenology, relationality and technology—all relatively under-researched terrain touched (and indeed transformed) by psychedelics. It is hoped that the content of this issue of *Dancecult* will inspire future scholarship in this continuing *terra incognita* in which electronic dance musics, their cultural movements and aesthetic sensibilities are impacted by psychedelics.

The edition also includes an additional non-guest issue feature article by Jordi Nofre and Manuel Garcia-Ruiz: “Nightlife Studies: Past, Present and Future”. And finally, it features event and book reviews compiled by *Dancecult*’s new Reviews Editor, Anita Jóri: Kim Feser’s review of McKenzie Wark’s *Raving* (Duke University Press, 2023); Tara Hill’s review of Jon Stratton’s *Spectacle, Fashion and the Dancing Experience in Britain, 1960–1990* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022); Moses Iten’s review of Hannes Liechti’s *This Track Contains Politics: The Culture of Sampling in Experimental Electronica* (Norient Books, 2022); Anja Schwanhäußer’s review of Guillaume Robin’s *Berghain, Techno und die Körperfabrik: Ethnographie eines Stammpublikums* (Büchner-Verlag, 2021), and; Luigi Monteanni’s review essay of Berlin’s 2023 CTM Festival, “Ears as Portals: Alternative Realities of Musical Infrastructures”.

Trace Reddell and Graham St John (Guest Editors), October 2023.

NOTES

- 1 We do not join the fraught and ongoing debate about “psychedelic” drug classification. Both technical and experiential in application, “psychedelic” is a “tricksy” term with a built-in ambiguity—an ambiguity said to be among its strengths (Dickins 2023).

REFERENCES

- Barrett, Frederick S., Katrin H. Preller and Mendel Kaelen. 2018. "Psychedelics and Music: Neuroscience and Therapeutic Implications". *International Review of Psychiatry* 30(4): 350–62. <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09540261.2018.1484342>>
- Anon. 1993. "Terence McKenna—The Re: Evolution(ary) Shaman". *Freakbeat* 8 (19 April): 17–19, 23–24.
- Balance, John, and Peter Christopherson. 1996. "Black Sun Magazine". Internet Archive (added 12 September 2015), <<https://archive.org/details/BlackSunMagazine/Terence+McKenna+interview.mp3>> (Accessed 6 October 2023).
- Bonny, Helen, and Walter Pahnke. 1972. "The Use of Music in Psychedelic (LSD) Psychotherapy". *Journal of Music Therapy* 9(2): 64–87.
- Dickins, Robert. 2023. "Psychedelic Trickys: Why the Word Psychedelic Evades Simple Definitions". *Psychedelic Press* (23 January): <<https://psychedelicpress.substack.com/p/psychedelic>> (Accessed 6 October 2023).
- McKenna, Terence. 1983. "The Syntax of Psychedelic Time: Fractals, Endpoints, End Times, Zero Points". Shared Visions Bookstore, Berkeley, CA (July), *The Library of Consciousness*: <<https://www.organism.earth/library/document/syntax-of-psychedelic-time>> (Accessed 6 October 2023).
- Newson, Martha, Ragini Khurana, Freya Cazorla and Valerie van Mulukom. 2021. "I Get High With a Little Help From My Friends': How Raves Can Invoke Identity Fusion and Lasting Cooperation Via Transformative Experiences". *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (24 September).
- St John, Graham. 2013. "Writing the Vibe: Arts of Representation in Electronic Dance Music Culture". Conversation. *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* 5(1): <<https://doi.org/10.12801/1947-5403.2013.05.01.11>>.
- Strickland, Justin C., Albert Garcia-Romeu and Matthew W. Johnson. 2021. "Set and Setting: A Randomized Study of Different Musical Genures in Supporting Psychedelic Therapy". *ACS Pharmacology & Translational Science* 4(2): 472–8. <<https://doi.org/10.1021/acsptsci.0c00187>>.